The 'typical' family — 4 years later

By Patricia Tennison

TYPICAL. VERRRY typical.

"You know, Richard, I wish you had this organized," said his wife of 20 years as he continued to strew the photographs and old newspaper clippings onto the polished dining room table that doubles as a writing desk.

He's meant to get around to those old mementos but just never found the time. Typical.

Jean, 15, disappears shyly into the bedroom to nurse a bout of the flu and passes her sister Nancy, 13, in a typical pose, curled on the edge of the kitchen dinette, talking on the telephone.

The Johnsons subscribe to National Geographic magazine. Their furniture is Mediterranean. They have two cats, Baby and Oliver.

SHE'S AN ALTO in the church choir. He's a former Little League umpire. She reads the women's news. He likes the sports.

Pretty typical? Yes, but it goes far beyond that.

The Johnsons, a family of six in Rolling Meadows, were chosen four years ago as the "typical" American family.

It was a nationwide search by the Public Affairs Center for Television in Washington, D. C. The public television corporation was looking for the "typical" American voter to find out his thoughts on the upcoming 1972 presidential election.

FOR A WEEK the Johnsons four-bedroom raised ranch at 2402 Willow Lane was easy to distinguish from the row of $40,000 to $50,000 homes on either side of them. Television cameramen followed them daily to prepare for a two-part television series depicting a "typical" day in their "typical" lives.

As a finale, Richard got to travel across the country with Sen. George McGovern for a behind-the-scenes view of a persidential campaign.

His main impression was the disorganization plaguing the McGovern campaign. The "typical" American voter wound up voting for Nixon.

"IT WAS AN eye-opener," Richard said, referring to his travels with the campaign press corps. "On camera they're so careful about what they say. But off the camera — oh mercy!

"All they care about is who can get the first scoop, get the worst news about somebody," Richard complained.

All the hoopla over the Johnsons four years ago hasn't changed their interest in politics much. "I'm not that politically motivated. But maybe a little more so than before," Richard said.

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Trib photo by John Dziekan Jr.

A "typical" evening in the life of a "typical" American family: Richard Johnson does some paperwork while his wife, Mary Anne, knits afghans and daughter Nancy thumbs through a magazine.

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Travels with McGovern brought vote for Nixon

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"SOME PEOPLE ASK why I don't run for alderman, but I don't want to get involved in politics," he said.

Life hasn't changed that much for the Johnsons in the last four years. They probably could still qualify as the "typical" American family.

Three of their children — Laurie, 18, Jean, and Nancy — are still at home. Rick, 20, is a sophomore at Northern Illinois University, De Kalb.

They have about $13,000 left on their mortgage and within the last few years have managed to boy two items they wanted in 1972: wall-to-wall carpeting and a color television set.

IF THERE'S been one significant change, it's a slight ease in their finances. Richard, 47, a credit manager at National Steel corp., Evanston, got a good raise in September and now brings home about $14,000 annually.

Mary Ann, 40, who works a scant mile away from her home as secretary to the pastor of their church, Trinity Lutheran, makes $6,000 a year.

To the Johnsons, it seems that gasoline prices have leveled, grocery prices are starting to level, and for the first time in years they have a little extra cash.

TO CELEBRATE, they took an untypical vacation over Thanksgiving to Las Vegas. It was Mary Ann's first plane ride. And over Christmas they spent a long weekend at a local resort.

"I feel maybe a little more complacent now, especially at work," Richard said. In his spare time he chooses fairly relaxing activities: a little golf [He shoots in the 80s], a good mystery book, or sports events on television. He's a Cubs fan.

Mary Ann describes her life as very busy: driving to work, driving the kids, keeping a house. She is president of the Trinity Lutheran Church's Women's guild. And when she has a moment to relax, she makes afghans.

"PERSONALLY, I feel very different now. When I was first married I was very naive. Now I'm more aware of myself as a person and — contrary to what you might think — I've learned to be a listener," she said with a quick smile toward her husband.

The Johnsons bemoan the lack of public transportation in the suburbs, which made it necessary for them in 1972 to have two cars. In 1976 — with two teenage drivers — they have four cars. And their "good" car — a 1972 Buick they purchased second hand — will have to be replaced soon.

"Those cars," Many Ann sighed," always seem to manage to keep us in debt."

Not unusual at all.

Trib photo by John Dziekan Jr.

The Johnsons: life hasn't changed much